

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE LXV COSAC
Lisbon, 31 May-1 June 2021
(held via videoconference)

IN THE CHAIR: Mr Luís CAPOULAS SANTOS, Chair of the European Affairs Committee of the Portuguese *Assembleia da República*

AGENDA:

1. Opening of the meeting of the LXV COSAC

- Welcome address by the President of the Portuguese *Assembleia da República*, Mr Eduardo FERRO RODRIGUES
- Introductory remarks by the Chair of the European Affairs Committee Portuguese *Assembleia da República*, Mr Luís CAPOULAS SANTOS
- Adoption of the agenda of the meeting of the LXV COSAC

2. Procedural issues and miscellaneous matters

- Information on the results of the meeting of the Presidential Troika of COSAC
- Presentation of the 35th Bi-annual Report of COSAC
- Letters received by the Presidency
- Procedural issues

3. Session I – ‘The Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the EU’

Keynote Speakers: Mr António COSTA, Prime Minister of Portugal; Mr David Maria SASSOLI, President of the European Parliament¹; Mr Margaritis SCHINAS, Vice-President of the European Commission for Promoting the European Way of Life

Chair: Mr Luís CAPOULAS SANTOS, Chairman of the European Affairs Committee of the Portuguese *Assembleia da República*

4. Session II – ‘Social Europe: what model for the triple economic, digital and climate transition?’

Keynote Speakers: Mr Nicolas SCHMIT, European Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights; Mr Gabriel BASTOS, Secretary of State for Social Security of Portugal

Short Video Messages: Mr Luca VISENTINI, Representative from the European Trade Union Confederation; Mr Markus J. BEYRER, Representative from Business Europe; Ms María RODRÍGUEZ, Representative from the European Youth Forum

Chair: Mr Luís CAPOULAS SANTOS, Chairman of the European Affairs Committee of the Portuguese *Assembleia da República*

5. Session III – ‘Implementation of the national recovery and resilience plans - the role of national Parliaments’

Keynote Speaker: Mr Paolo GENTILONI, European Commissioner for Economy; Ms Roberta METSOLA, First Vice-President of the European Parliament; Mr Marko POGAČNIK, Chair of the Committee on EU Affairs, Slovenian *Državni zbor*

Chair: Mr Luís CAPOULAS SANTOS, Chairman of the European Affairs Committee of the Portuguese *Assembleia da República*

6. Session IV – ‘Conference on the Future of Europe: state of play’

Keynote Speaker: Mr Guy VERHOFSTADT, Member of the European Parliament; Ms Ana Paula ZACARIAS, Secretary of State for European Affairs of Portugal (via video message); Ms Dubravka ŠUICA, Vice-President of the European Commission for Democracy and Demography

Co-Chairs: Mr Luís CAPOULAS SANTOS, Chairman of the European Affairs Committee of the Portuguese *Assembleia da República*; Mr Antonio TAJANI, Chairman of the Committee on Constitutional Affairs of the European Parliament

¹ Replaced by the First-Vice President of the European Parliament, Ms Roberta METSOLA.

PROCEEDINGS

1. Opening of the meeting of the LXV COSAC

Welcome address by Mr Eduardo FERRO RODRIGUES, President of the Portuguese *Assembleia da República*, and introductory remarks by Mr Luís CAPOULAS SANTOS, Chairman of the European Affairs Committee of the Portuguese *Assembleia da República*

Mr Eduardo FERRO RODRIGUES, President of the Portuguese *Assembleia da República*, thanked all those in the European institutions, particularly the European Parliament, as well as representatives in the national Parliaments, who had contributed in enabling the Parliamentary Dimension of the Portuguese Presidency to carry out its programme. He also thanked the Chair of the European Affairs Committee of the Portuguese *Assembleia da República*, Mr Luís CAPOULAS SANTOS, and his team for their tireless commitment throughout these six months. Mr FERRO RODRIGUES regretted that, due to the pandemic, it was not possible to welcome the delegations in Lisbon in person. He presented the topics to be discussed during the meeting as a reflection of the magnitude of the challenges that lay ahead.

With regard to the triple economic, digital and climate transition, Mr FERRO RODRIGUES stressed that the European Union stood out for its humanism, its defence of freedom and fundamental rights, its four freedoms, its single market and its attention to social cohesion as a unifying factor for harmonious societies. He highlighted the attention afforded to the digital challenges and environmental issues. Mr FERRO RODRIGUES also referred to the rapid progress and the importance of vaccination to bring about the possibility of social reopening, as well as to the social and economic consequences and the impact of the pandemic in these areas. On the measures to be taken for recovery, Mr FERRO RODRIGUES congratulated the ratification of the Own Resources Decision by the Member States and recalled the importance of submitting and giving due consideration to the national recovery plans, to ensure consistency between the objectives set and their implementation.

Mr FERRO RODRIGUES hoped the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFE) would be a comprehensive exercise of civic participation and inter-institutional cooperation, having highlighted the participation of national Parliaments and how important it was to have conclusions that responded to citizen's wishes. Mr FERRO RODRIGUES concluded by extending his best wishes to the Slovenian colleagues for the incoming Presidency.

Mr Luís CAPOULAS SANTOS thanked all the speakers and participants of the LXV COSAC plenary meeting, expressing his regret that it was being held in a virtual format due to the restrictions imposed by the pandemic. Mr CAPOULAS SANTOS stated that the role of national Parliaments in the European integration was crucial and that, during the past five months, the Presidency had tried to share information with all the Member State Parliaments, in a transparent way, and tried to listen to all the positions in order to reach consensus. The Chair also underlined how the Presidency had organized a series of events, sticking to the predicted calendar, and he took the opportunity to thank the German and Slovenian colleagues for their cooperation in the COSAC Troika framework. Mr CAPOULAS SANTOS emphasized the unanimity on the mandate received to ensure proper representation of the national Parliaments at the plenary of the CoFE and he highlighted the cooperation with the European Parliament during this period. He hoped that the Parliaments would be able to continue expressing their views and intervening in a coordinated fashion in order to build a more cohesive Europe.

Adoption of the agenda

The Chair presented the draft agenda of the LXV COSAC, which was adopted without amendment.

2. Procedural issues and miscellaneous matters

Mr CAPOULAS SANTOS welcomed the participants, especially new Chairs participating at the COSAC plenary for the first time, namely Ms Vladimíria MARCINKOVÁ, from the Slovakian *Národná rada*; Mr Siim KALLAS, from the Estonian *Riigikogu*; and Mr Stefan MUSOIU, from the Romanian *Camera Deputaților*.

- Briefing on the results of the meeting of the Presidential Troika of COSAC

Mr CAPOULAS SANTOS presented the results of the Troika meeting, held on 27th May.

On the COSAC Contribution and Conclusions, Mr CAPOULAS SANTOS explained that, since it was not possible to meet in person, it was also not possible to draft the Contribution or Conclusions. The Chair explained that a letter, endorsed by the Troika, on the COSAC work done during the semester, would be sent to the European institutions and then circulated to the delegations.

- Presentation of the 35th Bi-annual Report of COSAC

The Chair thanked all the national Parliaments who contributed to the 35th Bi-annual Report, and its main findings were presented in a video format shown during the meeting. The Chair also thanked the COSAC Secretariat for its work and gave the floor to the Permanent Member of the COSAC Secretariat, Kenneth CURMI, for a few words on the report.

- Letters received by the Presidency

The Chair referred to the following letters received by the Presidency:

- Letter from Sir William CASH, Chairman of the European Scrutiny Committee, UK *House of Commons*, requesting participation at the LXV COSAC.
- Letters from Mr Pere LÓPEZ, Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Andorran Parliament; and Ms Fabrice NOTARI, Chair of the Committee on Negotiations with European Union, and Ms Stéphanie VALERI, President of the *Conseil National* of Monaco, requesting participation at the LXV COSAC.
- Letter from Mr Guido WOLF, Chairman of the Committee on European Union Questions of the German *Bundesrat*, notifying that he would be leaving his position as Chair.

Mr CAPOULAS SANTOS referred to the letters received during the Presidency from the United Kingdom, Andorran and Monegasque Parliaments, all of whom were invited to this meeting as observers. Besides these, the Parliaments of Iceland, Norway, Switzerland and Georgia were also invited as observers. The Presidency had also received a farewell letter from Mr Guido Wolf, from the German *Bundesrat*, who had recently left his position. The Chair wished him success, and extended his wished to Mr Tomáš VALÁŠEK, from the Slovakian *Národná rada*, and Ms Mailis REPS, from Estonian *Riigikogu*, who had also left their positions as Chairs of the respective European Affairs Committees.

- Procedural Issues

Mr CAPOULAS SANTOS referred to the COSAC co-financing procedure for 2022-2023. A letter of intent had been sent to all the delegations in January: some national Parliaments had already replied and committed to the co-financing scheme. The Chair reminded the remaining Parliaments that they still had the possibility to submit the letter of intent declaring their commitment during the Slovenian Presidency.

On behalf of the German *Bundestag* and *Bundesrat*, Mr Markus TÖNS, Deputy Chairman of the Committee on the Affairs of the European Union, German *Bundestag*, thanked the Presidency for the cooperation in the previous months and expressed his best wishes to the incoming Slovenian Presidency.

3. Session I: The Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the EU

Keynote Speakers: Mr António COSTA, Prime Minister of Portugal; Ms Roberta METSOLA, First Vice-President of the European Parliament; Mr Margaritis SCHINAS, Vice-President of the European Commission Promoting our European Way of Life

Chair: Mr Luís CAPOULAS SANTOS, Chair of the European Affairs Committee of the Portuguese *Assembleia da República*

Mr António COSTA, Prime Minister of Portugal, opened the session by noting that the COVID-19 pandemic had greatly affected society and that the current economic and social crisis was the biggest witnessed since the second world war. He expressed the view that the EU had reacted from the outset in a very coordinated and firm fashion, as opposed to past crises. He emphasised the decisive role played by the European Central Bank (ECB), the Council, the Commission, and other institutions, highlighting the support provided to businesses and employment, the collective vaccines procurement, and the biggest financial programme ever created. In this respect, he welcomed the rapid ratification of the EU's Own Resources Decision (ORD) by national Parliaments in five months, a procedure that had lasted 28 months in the past, showing that national Parliaments were fully aware of the urgency.

Mr COSTA reminded participants that the motto of the Portuguese Presidency was “Time to deliver: a fair, green and digital recovery”, implementing what had been adopted under the German Presidency, with three clear priorities. The first concerned the economic and social recovery for Europe. This depended on the success of the vaccination programme and the objective of vaccinating 70% of the adult population by the end of summer, in order to create the conditions for the internal market to function again and develop the four freedoms. He stressed that the recent agreement of the Council and the European Parliament on the EU digital COVID certificate was of the utmost importance for freedom of movement. Prime Minister COSTA also emphasised the EU's duty to speed up its involvement with the rest of the world, while noting that Europe would not be safe as long as vaccinations were limited to the EU. He reminded participants that the EU was the only democratic region in the world that retained high levels of exports of vaccines produced. He noted that all Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) programmes were approved and that until growth rates of 2019 were reached, the escape clause of the Stability and Growth Pact should be retained. The Prime Minister stressed that the various national recovery and resilience plans (NRRP) would be the cornerstone for the recovery process and that, in June, the Commission should be able to start the first mission of public debt to finance these plans, which were submitted by most Member States and were currently being negotiated. By the end of the Portuguese Presidency, at least the first package of NRRP should be adopted by ECOFIN on 18 June, or on 30 June during an extraordinary meeting.

Referring to the green transition, Mr COSTA noted the adoption of the first European Climate Law and the clear common commitment for a 55 per cent reduction in emissions by 2030. He acknowledged that the European Council gave a clear mandate to the Commission to provide a roadmap to achieve this goal. With respect to digital transition, he referred, amongst other things, to the e-privacy Regulation, to decisions on child pornography and other criminal practices on-line and a declaration in the framework of the Digital Assembly for an ecosystem based on people and on strengthening digital literacy and democratic values.

Referring to the second priority of the Presidency, namely to develop the Social Pillar of the EU, Mr COSTA welcomed the Commission's Action Plan and its quantifiable targets and clear time schedule. He noted that the Porto Social Summit was crucial and that, for the first time ever, there was a Tripartite agreement between the social partners and the European institutions to implement this Action Plan.

He also elaborated on the third Presidency priority: an autonomous Europe, open to the world. He stressed that this did not aim at protectionism but at establishing a diverse, strong, international network to protect the high democratic, public health, social and environmental standards. He also emphasised the need to

strengthen transatlantic relations. Besides the EU-UK agreement, the EU should focus on the agreements with Mexico, Chile, Mercosur, strengthen the EU's presence in indo-pacific area (Mr COSTA referred to the EU-India Summit) and to bear in mind the relations with its neighbours in the East and in Africa, noting particularly the Post-Cotonou Agreement and the EU-Africa Green Investment Forum.

Finally, Mr COSTA concluded by highlighting the importance of reaching an agreement to launch the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFE) on 9 May. The Prime Minister encouraged direct participation of citizens and active involvement of national Parliaments in the discussions, which should focus on policies rather than on institutions.

Ms Roberta METSOLA, First Vice-President of the European Parliament, was the second keynote speaker in session I, replacing Mr Maria David SASSOLI, President of the European Parliament. She acknowledged that one year and a half after the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, and despite the many challenges that lay ahead, the focus should be on building a sustainable, fair and inclusive future together. She stressed the importance of strengthening the European project and enhancing parliamentary democracy.

Ms METSOLA stressed that although the European Parliament was able to remain operational and exercise its prerogatives during the pandemic, this itself brought to light certain shortcomings. Therefore an internal reflection process was launched on rethinking democracy and how the European Parliament should be working, with the aim of moving towards a more resilient and effective institution, better prepared for the future. Stronger Parliaments should be at the heart of the European recovery strategy, a strategy that should fight inequalities and poverty, and promote social inclusion. She acknowledged the attention given by the Portuguese Presidency to the social dimension and the Porto Social Summit, and encouraged Parliaments to ensure that this would be duly reflected in the NRRP. The European recovery plan could finance measures in the field of justice and social and territorial cohesion, Ms METSOLA added, reminding participants that, in part due to the work of the European Parliament, the means to tackle structural problems and reinforce social Europe were available.

Ms METSOLA emphasised that the European Parliament had worked hard in order to reach an ambitious climate and energy package before summer. With regard to the digital transition, she stressed that Europe should lead, meaning that a legislative and regulatory framework fit for purpose and future-proof should be in place. She also noted the importance of an EU budget financed in an effective and sustainable way and welcomed the ratification of the ORD by the EU national Parliaments. In addition, she welcomed the agreed coordinated approach regarding the EU digital COVID certificate and expressed her confidence in the venture, noting that it would facilitate people's lives and help economies re-emerge. At the same time, Ms METSOLA underlined that it was fundamental to join efforts regarding the vaccination campaign and to build the foundations of a European Health Union.

She also elaborated on the CoFE, which was a priority for the European Parliament, and thanked the Portuguese Presidency for their efforts to set it up. She noted that the European project was yet unfinished and that citizens should get involved in its development. The CoFE will be an opportunity for citizens to get involved and take ownership in the building of a Europe for the next generation. Ms METSOLA stressed the crucial role of national Parliaments in the CoFE and encouraged Members of Parliament to build bridges between the EU and its citizens. She also underlined that both national and European parliamentarians would be substantially represented in the plenary of the CoFE, in order to ensure the diversity of systems and opinions.

Ms METSOLA stressed the importance for the EU not to be self-centred and to be able to speak with a common voice on the global stage and to defend the EU's strategic interests and values. To that end, it was important to ensure a more closely aligned common security and foreign policy. Referring to the recent incident involving Belarus, Ms METSOLA stressed the importance of having a Europe that spoke with one

voice, in defence of European values and every dissident looking to Europe as a beacon of hope, referring to Mr Roman Protasevich and Ms Sofia Sapega, in particular.

Referring to the issue of migration, she called for a new responsibility-sharing mechanism. She noted that the European Parliament would play its part and that national Parliaments should cooperate to create a true, lasting, European migration policy based on solidarity and strong actions against traffickers. She also stressed the responsibility of parliamentarians to push back against the anti-EU narrative and keep reminding people that Europe was the world's greatest peace project. While Europe should keep evolving, she noted that it was diversity that made Europe unique. To this end she called for parliamentary solidarity and cooperation, as these were essential when facing challenges that were more serious than and quite different from those the EU had faced in the past.

Mr Margaritis SCHINAS, Vice-President of the European Commission, was the last keynote speaker to take the floor during this session. He started by congratulating the Portuguese Presidency for successfully steering the EU's work during one of the most difficult moments of recent history. He acknowledged that the Presidency had delivered both on the pandemic management side and on the post-pandemic challenges. He noted that the European way of life was severely tested during these months and many of the values and pillars on which society was structured were threatened, but also emphasised that the EU could take collective pride in the fact that the European model of society had withstood these extraordinary circumstances and had proved resilient, cohesive, solid; the health and education systems had remained up and running. He pointed out that all this was a collective endeavour. With respect to the vaccines, Mr SCHINAS noted that the Portuguese Presidency had worked closely with the Commission, making the vaccination strategy, vaccines sharing and exports a success and he recognised that the fact that all 27 Member States stayed united on this was historic and commendable. He stressed that the unprecedented scale of the vaccination strategy, the risks taken and the solidarity shown had paid off, and that Europe had become a success story on the world stage. He also praised the work of the Presidency regarding recommendations for travelling within the Union, as well as to and from third countries, and regarding the COVID-19 certificate, a Regulation adopted in a two-month record time.

Mr SCHINAS acknowledged that the Portuguese Presidency was sensitive to the social consequences of the crisis and noted the successful adoption of the Social Pillar Action Plan and the Porto Summit. In addition he referred to the European Climate Law, a landmark agreement to guide EU policies for the next 30 years and to shape green recovery but also economy and society. He also praised the Presidency for advancing key proposals of the digital agenda, including the Digital Service Act, Digital Market Act and Data Governance Act. He also noted the agreement on the Blue Card proposal providing for the first time an EU targeted scheme for legal migration, addressing skill shortages. To this end, he expressed hope that this would be the precursor for the New EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, a historic opportunity for the EU to get a holistic and comprehensive policy framework for migration and asylum.

He also referred to the recovery and stressed that the main challenge toward this goal was the implementation of the NRRP and that it would be vital for these plans to frame the growth strategy of the EU for the years to come. He concluded with a few words on the role of national Parliaments, emphasising their central role in EU policymaking. He noted that the engagement of national Parliaments was proven by the numerous contributions received in relation to the EU response to the pandemic, contributing to recovery and resilience. Many Parliaments had indicated that they shared the Commission's view that the green and digital transition should remain the point of orientation for the economic recovery and believed that the Commission wished to contribute efficiently to further interparliamentary cooperation.

In the ensuing debate, 28 speakers took the floor.

A large number of speakers referred to the CoFE. Mr Christian BUCHMAN, Austrian *Bundesrat*, expressed the view that in order to kick-start the economy, cities and local authorities should be involved and

subsidiarity should be taken seriously; he also considered it important to include the Western Balkans, a suggestion echoed by Mr Richard HÖRCSIK, Hungarian *Országgyűlés*. Mr Bogdan KLICH, Polish *Senat*, called for the CoFE to also deal with institutional solutions, while, on the contrary, Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN, Finnish *Eduskunta*, member of the Convention in 2002-2003 which led to the Lisbon Treaties, called for the CoFE to focus only on policies and substance and asked for the role of national Parliaments to be ensured. Ms Susanna SUMELZO JORDÁN, Spanish *Cortes Generales*, congratulated the Portuguese Presidency for its commitment to the CoFE and encouraged national Parliaments to seize this opportunity. Mr Domagoj HAJDUKOVIĆ, Croatian *Hrvatski sabor* thanked the Portuguese Presidency for keeping the COSAC Chairs informed about the meetings of the CoFE Executive Board, welcoming this level of transparency. Mr Andrej ČERNIGOJ, Slovenian *Državni zbor*, welcomed the launch of the CoFE on 9 May and noted that Slovenia, as the next Presidency, would actively continue this work. Mr Markus TÖNS, German *Bundestag*, noted that, despite the pandemic, the Presidency managed to bring forward the plans on CoFE and that in the next months and years democratic Europe should be able to provide correct answers to the challenges with its partners in the world. Mr Neal RICHMOND, Irish *Houses of the Oireachtas*, stressed that, having the lessons from Brexit in mind, the CoFE should address issues that citizens across the Union really cared about, that it would be impactful and fully engaged with Member State and regional Parliaments. Similarly, Ms Anita CZERWINKSA, Polish *Sejm*, stressed that the CoFE should listen to what kind of future citizens wanted and spend time finding solutions that pay respect to pluralism and differences among people. Mr Dario STEFANO, Italian *Senato della Repubblica*, referred to the Dublin Regulation and the migratory pressure felt by Italy and stressed that the CoFE should work on migration, defence and budgetary policies, areas where big steps forward had to be taken.

Ms Liliana TANGUY, French *Assemblée nationale*, noted that the crisis showed that there was a need for strengthened cooperation in health, through immediate cooperation between Member States. Ms Isabel MEIRELLES, Portuguese *Assembleia da República*, also noted that the EU needed a common health policy and praised the fair access to quality vaccines and the adoption of the COVID-19 certificate in record time. In terms of the external dimension, she noted the huge progress made, including the EU-India Summit, the revival of the transatlantic relations and being the first Council Presidency dealing with the definitive departure of the UK.

Mr RICHMOND noted that some citizens had expressed concerns on the EU vaccines rollout. Mr Richard HÖRCSIK, Hungarian *Országgyűlés*, informed participants that his country was the first to administer vaccines that were not registered with the European Medicines Agency, and as a result more than two million people had been vaccinated with these vaccines. He considered the Porto Social Summit a success but reminded colleagues of subsidiarity and national competences with respect to social questions.

Ms Ria OOMEN RUIJTEN, Dutch *Eerste Kamer*, noted that the ORD was a major breakthrough and informed participants that the Dutch Senate had also recently approved it. She also congratulated the Portuguese Presidency for the Porto Social Summit and noted that the Action Plan adopted would influence the recovery plans. Mr Bogdan KLICH, Polish *Senat*, emphasised that the monitoring of the implementation of the NRRP with regular review would be crucial, and stressed the need for transparent implementation in accordance with the principles of the rule of law.

Ms Marietta GIANNAKOU, Greek *Vouli ton Antiprosopon*, acknowledged the progress made with respect to many priorities of the Portuguese Presidency but asked if the Presidency expected further developments in some sectors, including the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and the enlargement process of the Western Balkans. Mr HAJDUKOVIĆ also noted that the Western Balkans enlargement was marginalised during the current Presidency and expressed his hope that progress could be made during the Slovenian and French Presidencies. Mr Sergio BATTELLI, Italian *Camera dei deputati*, also called for attention to the enlargement process of the Western Balkans and in particular of Albania.

Ms SUMELZO JORDÁN referred to young people in Europe under the age of 30 and how to create opportunities and hope for them in the future. She stressed that mobility was important for the recovery. Ms CZERWINKSA, gave a positive assessment to the Portuguese Presidency objectives in combating the pandemic, praised the vaccination progress and the EU digital COVID certificate that would facilitate travelling. Ms Satu HASSI, Finnish *Eduskunta*, called for the analysis of EU legislation and in particular legislation relating to free movement, in order to ensure that it was suitable in the event of a future pandemic.

Mr BATTELLI welcomed the work done by the Presidency during the past months relating to the external dimension and migration policy and stressed the importance of discussing migratory flows in meetings with African countries. In view of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, he called for balancing responsibilities between countries of first arrival and other countries. Referring also to the issue of migration, Mr ČERNIGOJ underlined the link between the Schengen area and border management, calling for these to be top priorities, in addition to the need for an EU Envoy for migration. Mr Emanuel MALLIA, Maltese *Kamra tad-Deputati*, expressed his optimism on recovery, especially in light of the COVID-19 certificate adoption, despite the negative effects that the pandemic had had on health, economy and social well-being. Turning to migration, he expressed concerns about the continued and increased arrivals through the central Mediterranean route, which was bound to intensify in the coming months. He therefore stressed the importance of the external dimension of migration, as it focusses on stemming migratory flows and, in this regard, he welcomed the initiative of the Portuguese Presidency to engage in dialogue with the Northern Africa countries.

Mr Jean-François RAPIN, French *Senat*, referred to the green architecture of the pact that would assist the recovery of industries like agriculture and food production and noted that the Commission had shown a lack of transparency in the impact assessments. He also emphasised that British partners were not taking the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement seriously, especially with respect to the Northern Ireland Protocol and this would have an effect on the integrity of the internal market.

Mr Ruairi Ó MURCHÚ, Irish *House of Oireachtas*, referred to the situation in Palestine and Belarus. With respect to Belarus, he welcomed the EU response and stressed the need for sanctions. In relation to vaccinations, Mr Ó MURCHÚ called attention to the global supply and noted difficulties experienced with certain companies. Ms Laima ANDRIKIENĖ, Lithuanian *Seimas*, welcomed the COVID-19 certificate and the vaccines sharing, as well as the focus on the EU social dimension and the Porto Summit that gave an impetus for the implementation of the Action Plan.

Finally, seven more speakers from observer and candidate countries took the floor. Ms Anniken HUITFELDT, Norwegian *Stortinget*, commended the Portuguese Presidency for the strong emphasis on solidarity and common values. Mr William CASH, UK *House of Commons* urged the EU to be flexible with respect to the Northern Ireland Protocol and Good Friday Agreement. Mr Charles KINNOULL, UK *House of Lords*, noted that the ratification of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement was an important milestone, enabling the 24 committees to start vital work, possibly in June, and a new warm relationship between EU and UK. Mr Akos UJHELYI, Serbian *Narodna skupština*, stressed that, despite the pandemic, Serbia had been working consistently towards reforms in order to become a fully-fledged member of the EU, and provided information about the chapters opened for negotiation. Ms Senida MESI, Albanian *Kuvendi i Shqipërisë*, expressed disappointment about the delay from the EU with regard to accession negotiations, but also hope that progress would be made during the Slovenian Presidency and that the first intergovernmental meeting could be held as soon as possible. Mr Arber ADEMI, North Macedonian *Assembly*, reminded participants that North Macedonia received the first recommendation to start negotiations already in 2009 and emphasised that the proposal of the Portuguese Presidency to overcome the issues with Bulgaria was assessed as a good basis and expressed hope that negotiations could start in June. Ms Simona KORDIC, Montenegrin *Skupština*, noted that Montenegro as candidate country took great

interest in the benchmarks placed by the EU Member States, especially with regard to the economic consolidation very much linked to the issues of migration.

The keynote speakers were given the floor to provide replies and final remarks.

Vice-President of the Commission SCHINAS covered three topics. First, he noted the consensus amongst national Parliaments and the European Parliament that the European way to respond to the pandemic, both in terms of managing the health crisis and the recovery, was the only way. Secondly, with respect to the CoFE, he stressed the need to use this unique opportunity to engage in dialogue with real people and to take the debate out of Brussels where it mattered e.g. with national Parliaments, farmers, the Erasmus generation, regional authorities, social partners. Thirdly, he emphasised that the necessity for Europe to move swiftly on the new agreement on migration and expressed hope that an embryonic agreement could be achieved by the end of the Portuguese Presidency.

European Parliament First-Vice President METSOLA took the opportunity to congratulate the Portuguese Presidency for the milestones achieved and the political vision shown, including the ratification of the ORD, the EU digital COVID certificate, the Blue Card agreement, the Porto Social Summit, and the climate targets. With regard to the way that the European Union dealt with the pandemic, she emphasised how the EU had stood behind all countries, big and small, without discrimination and in a way that made sure that European citizens could really feel that they were part of a club that treated and protected them equally. With respect to the CoFE she thanked participants for reaffirming its parliamentary dimension and emphasised it should not be a top down, but bottom up approach. On migration she agreed with Mr SCHINAS that a sort of agreement or framework could be agreed towards the end of the Portuguese Presidency with solidarity at its very core, and reminded that the European Parliament had always been a very active partner in this regard. Finally, with respect to the recovery and resilience plans, she stated that the European Parliament was keen to engage intensively with the Commission to ensure that all plans were implemented correctly and transparently.

Prime Minister COSTA thanked participants for the kind words addressed to the Presidency and stressed that work would continue for another month, also laying foundations for the next Slovenian Presidency. He confirmed that the European Health Union was needed, as proved by this crisis, but acknowledged that despite a European Medicines Agency, national authorities had their own individual competences and were giving out diverse information on vaccines, thus undermining the citizens' trust. He also stressed the need to increase access to vaccines, and the need, not only for the EU but also for others, to export both medicines, including raw materials needed for vaccines production. He emphasised that the EU contributed with 1 billion euros for vaccines production in Africa, and had helped the production in Latin America. Mr COSTA also referred to the CAP reform and noted that work would continue in June with the aim of advancing the trilogue discussions. With respect to the Western Balkans enlargement, he referred in particular to opening the intergovernmental meetings with Albania and North Macedonia and overcoming the obstacles with Bulgaria. On migration he expressed his clear support for the broad Commission package presented last September and agreed that an embryonic agreement could be possible by the end of the Presidency. He welcomed the conclusion of the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement and wished every success in its implementation, especially in critical priority areas such as border matters with Ireland or fisheries policy. Finally, with respect to recovery, he called for progress in the area of budget and taxation policies, in particular when it came to the own resources and the funding of recovery. In July there would be a meeting of the G20, and thanks also to US President Joe BIDEN's position, opportunities would arise to move to fairer taxation.

4. Session II: Social Europe: what model for the triple economic, digital and climate transition?

Keynote speakers: Mr Nicolas SCHMIT, European Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights; Mr Gabriel BASTOS, Secretary of State for Social Security of Portugal

Short video messages: Mr Luca VISENTINI, Representative from the European Trade Union Confederation; Mr Markus J. BEYRER, Representative from Business Europe; Ms María RODRIGUEZ, Representative from the European Youth Forum

Chair: Mr Luís CAPOULAS SANTOS, Chair of the European Affairs Committee of the Portuguese *Assembleia da República*

European Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights, Mr Nicolas SCHMIT started his intervention by welcoming the joint commitments made by the EU governments, social partners and civil society at the Social Summit in Porto. He stated that social issues needed to be discussed hand in hand with economic issues and that the major changes facing Europe had to be dealt with in a fair manner. Mr SCHMIT gave a brief overview of the three EU headline targets proposed by the European Commission in its Social Pillar Action Plan to be achieved by the end of the decade in the areas of employment, skills, and social protection, in line with the UN Sustainable Development Goals. The first target of the Action Plan was employment, with the specific target of at least 78 percent of the population aged 20 to 64 being employed by 2030. In this context, he mentioned the Commission Recommendation for Effective Active Support to Employment (EASE), whose aim was to guide labour market transitions from declining to expanding sectors. Another key target of the Social Pillar Action Plan was that at least 60 percent of all adults would participate in training every year. This would include upskilling and re-skilling employees as well as providing support to inactive or unemployed young people. Another key objective was to reduce poverty. The number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion should be reduced by at least 15 million by 2030. One focus would be the European Child Guarantee to ensure that children at risk of poverty and social exclusion had effective access to key services such as healthcare, proper housing and education. In conclusion, Mr. SCHMIT stated that the Union had demonstrated its ability to act in solidarity and adopt new solutions to overcome this crisis, and highlighted the urgency of putting the national recovery and resilience plans into practice.

The Secretary of State for Social Security of Portugal, Mr Gabriel BASTOS, began his remarks by elaborating on the direct impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had had on the European Union. The social and economic consequences were devastating, yet the European Union was able to react quickly and decisively in this emergency. However, he urged parliamentarians to ensure a constant exchange of views with citizens regarding the measures taken during the pandemic. There was a need for parliaments to engage with citizens and to be actively involved in the whole process. He expressed his hope for 2021 to be a turning point to overcome the crisis, and described the Porto Social Commitment signed by European Commission President Ursula von der LEYEN, Portuguese Prime Minister Antonio COSTA, European Parliament President David SASSOLI and representatives of social partners as a milestone of a new era. The European Pillar of Social Rights and its Action Plan would be at the very core of Europe's recovery. However, the recovery would only be sustainable and successful if it was fair and inclusive, ensuring that equal opportunities prevailed for all and that no one was left behind. The recovery would only be successful if no new inequalities were created and persistent inequalities were corrected. He described the Action Plan as an instrument looking towards the future. He highlighted the particular need to build a stronger Europe that acted in a coordinated fashion and in solidarity in order to achieve a dynamic, green and inclusive foundation for the European Union.

Mr Luca VISENTINI, Representative from the European Trade Union Confederation, started his intervention by saying that the COVID-19 pandemic had a huge impact on the European economies and that Europe was facing two additional challenges: climate change and digital transformation. He emphasised the need of building a more sustainable, inclusive and equitable economic model that left nobody behind. This would require further emergency measures until recovery, the creation of quality jobs, and the launch of a just transition were achieved.

Mr Markus J. BEYRER, Representative from Business Europe said that Member States needed to focus on how to ensure that the digital and green transformation led to more real growth. He added that measures needed to differentiate between the European level and the national level and that subsidiarity was crucial.

Ms María RORDRIGUEZ, Representative from the European Youth Forum, highlighted the significant youth unemployment that Europe was facing. She explained that the European Youth Forum had developed a Youth Pledge and thanked Commissioner SCHMIT for his commitment to uphold the rights of the youth and engage meaningfully with young people and youth organisations in the framework of the EU's Action Plan. She called on parliamentarians to listen to their young constituents and safeguard their social rights.

During the ensuing debate, 23 speakers took the floor. There was general support for the results achieved at the Porto Social Summit. Mr Stefan MUSOIU, Romanian *Camera Deputaţilor*, argued that the Social Summit was an important contribution to fight social consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Several Members referred to the challenges children and youth were facing. Mr Dragoş PÎSLARU, European Parliament, stated that the youth had to be at the core of the European plan. Ms Roberta METSOLA, European Parliament, called for a common fight against youth unemployment, while Ms Marzia CASOLATI, Italian *Senato della Repubblica*, underlined the importance of combating child poverty. Mr Joe MCHUGH, Irish *Houses of the Oireachtas*, urged his colleagues to listen to young people. Ms Susana SUMELZO, Spanish *Cortes Generales*, welcomed the focus on the digital and green transition, stressing that it needed to be a fair one. This view was also expressed by Mr Andrzej GRZYB, Polish *Sejm*. Ms Liliana TANGUY, French *Assemblée nationale*, said that the digital and green transition meant that Europe's economic and social model must be changed to make it more sustainable. A double transition, which was fair to everyone, was needed. Both Ms TANGUY and Mr Marko PAVIC, Croatian *Hrvatski sabor*, stressed the importance of prioritising job creation. Ms Agnes JONGERIUS, European Parliament, raised the question of how the green transition could be used for social progress. Mr Dragoş PÎSLARU, European Parliament, as well as Ms Marzia CASOLATI, Italian *Senato della Repubblica*, highlighted the importance of bringing economic and social policies together. Mr Igor ANTAUER, Slovenian *Državni svet*, said that the work done by parliaments in different policy areas should be better coordinated. Mr Sergio BATTELLI, Italian *Camera dei Deputati*, expressed the view that the focus should be on sustainable and inclusive growth. This meant, firstly, implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights and, secondly, guaranteeing the inclusion of the Pillar in national recovery and resilience plans to ensure a fair green and digital transition. Ms Isabel MEIRELLES, Portuguese *Assembleia da República*, stressed that after the end of the pandemic, the social aspects would be increasingly important and that it was crucial to monitor the measures taken by the government in order to implement the European Pillar of Social Rights as approved in Porto. Both Neale RICHMOND, Irish *Houses of the Oireachtas* and Mr Andrej HUNKO, German *Bundestag*, noted that this crisis offered an opportunity to rebuild the European economy. Mr Andrej HUNKO further added that it was therefore important that the recovery fund was very much in harmony with the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the UN, and that the focus should be on sustainable growth. Mr Tomas TOMILINAS, Lithuanian *Seimas*, expressed the view that national social agendas should correspond with European leadership. Mr Peter KMEC, Slovak *Národná rada*, suggested that the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFE) should come up with suggestions on how to make the social aspect an inherent part of the digital and green transition. He saw the need for a monitoring mechanism on how the 20 principles of the social pillar would be implemented. Mr Zoltan DEZELLE, Hungarian *Országgyűlés*, welcomed the efforts of the Portuguese Presidency, but also emphasized that, in his view, Social Europe would only succeed if it respected the national models and the differences between Member States and their traditions. Mr Didier MARIE, French *Sénat*, raised the question of whether the European Social objectives were achievable objectives. Ms Gabriela CREȚU, Romanian *Senat*, expressed concerns about the existing inequalities and called for a change of the neoliberal mindset. Mr Ioannis BOURNOUS, Greek *Vouli ton Ellinon*, considered the measures taken so far by the Union for economic recovery to be insufficient and expressed the view that a definitive reform of the Stability and Growth Pact was needed.

Mr Predrag RAJIC, Serbian *Narodna skupština*, outlined the great importance of digitalization in terms of social progress.

Ms RODRIGUEZ expressed satisfaction that there was much discussion about the situation of young people, but reiterated that challenges such as age discrimination, no access to employment benefits, and lower minimum income still existed and needed to be addressed. She called on parliamentarians to engage in dialogue with young people. Mr Maxime DEPUTTI, Representative from Business Europe, underlined the need to bring people back to work to achieve the goal of successful enterprises. This required matching the needs of the labor market with the skills of the workforce. Mr VISINITI said that the exceptional results from Porto must now be implemented. For the time being, the continuation of support measures, investment in the creation of quality jobs, a just transition as the core of the recovery and the strengthening of social rights were still needed.

In his response, Mr SCHMIT emphasised that the recovery was going to be effective only if the social dimension was fully integrated. National parliaments had to use their influence to help shape the right policies for the future. Regarding the youth, he argued for a clear commitment both from political but also social partners, and urged colleagues to invest in young people. Mr BASTOS echoed this in his closing remarks, focusing on young people and their future, once again reminding colleagues that the Social Summit in Porto was an important milestone.

5. Session III: Implementation of the national recovery and resilience plans - the role of national Parliaments

Keynote speakers: Mr Paolo GENTILONI, European Commissioner for Economy; Ms Roberta METSOLA, First Vice-President of the European Parliament; Mr Marko POGAČNIK, Chair of the European Affairs Committee, Slovenian *Državni zbor*

Chair: Mr Luís CAPOULAS SANTOS, Chair of the European Affairs Committee of the Portuguese *Assembleia da República*

In the first keynote address, European Commissioner for Economy, Mr Paolo GENTILONI, emphasized the close collaboration between the European Commission and Member States in the process of preparing the national recovery and resilience plans over the course of the past months. He reiterated the challenge of the task, namely that Member States were asked to develop a multi-year agenda of reforms and instruments in just a few months. The national plans needed to meet ambitious targets for investments in the green and digital transition, lay out precise milestones and timetables and address the reforms included in the European Commission's country-specific recommendations for the years 2019 and 2020. Mr GENTILONI said the European Commission had encouraged governments to consult widely with national Parliaments, regional authorities, social partners and civil society in order to ensure broad ownership of the plans. Nineteen Member States had already submitted their plans; the remaining were expected in the next days with only one still to be submitted after the summer. In parallel, all national Parliaments had by now ratified the Own Resources Decision that enabled the European Commission to finalize the setting up of the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) and tap the financial markets in the next weeks. Mr GENTILONI explained that the European Commission aimed to present the first proposal for the implementation of the decisions on the plans to the Council in the second half of June. Subsequently, the Council would have up to four weeks to adopt the plans. In the coming months it was necessary to ensure that the plans were rolled out consistently and the money was spent well. While the European Commission was going to work hand in hand with Member States, national Parliaments and the European Parliament also had an important role to play in this process. The European Parliament had recently invited the European Commission to a first Recovery and Resilience Dialogue to discuss implementation matters. Currently, the Recovery and Resilience Scoreboard was being developed and would serve as a basis for future Dialogues. Mr GENTILONI went on to explain that the European Parliament was going to receive an overview of the

European Commission's preliminary findings on the fulfilment of milestones and targets of the national plans which were to form the basis for the next disbursement decisions. Mr GENTILONI emphasized that the involvement of national Parliaments was crucial to the success of the RRF, yet the role of national Parliaments in the implementation of the national recovery and resilience plans depended on the national governments' frameworks in place. The European Commission could only reiterate its call for governments to find an appropriate institutional set-up that enabled parliamentary scrutiny of the implementation of the plans.

In the second keynote address, First Vice-President of the European Parliament, Ms Roberta METSOLA, emphasized that the European Parliament took the scrutiny of the RRF very seriously. The Recovery and Resilience Dialogue between the European Commission and the European Parliament was to take place bi-monthly in the context of which the application of the RRF regulation was to be scrutinised as well. Ms METSOLA said the European Parliament was interested to hear how national Parliaments organized a similar parliamentary scrutiny of their executive branches. She went on to underline the importance of cooperation and the exchange of views between parliaments on a regular basis. COSAC, as well as the European Parliamentary Week and the Interparliamentary Conference on Stability, Economic Coordination and Governance, could all play a role in this regard. At the same time, new information exchange platforms between the services could be explored, in order to add value to the collaboration in post-pandemic times. This would allow for the timely exchange of technical information on the RRF during its implementation phase and help to prepare the political discussions for the post-pandemic European Semester. Ms METSOLA encouraged the Members to ensure strong ownership of the national recovery and resilience plans with a wide spectrum of stakeholders. She said the European Parliament considered a close stakeholder's involvement as a contribution to increased democratic control and that this would also provide valuable inputs for the parliamentary scrutiny. By enhancing and increasing political ownership, national Parliaments could notably contribute to the success of the RRF. Ms METSOLA concluded by saying that this was also a unique opportunity to develop a common understanding of the role of national Parliaments in the EU economic governance framework, in order to make it more efficient, democratic and legitimate.

In the third keynote address, Marko POGAČNIK, Chair of the European Affairs Committee, Slovenian *Državni zbor*, pointed out that the RRF had the potential to enhance Europe's economic competitiveness. He emphasized the historic dimension of the funds to be disbursed in the framework of the Recovery Facility, stating that Slovenia was to receive 5 billion EUR which was more than half of the country's annual budget. Mr POGAČNIK expressed his hope that the implementation of the RRF would not create an additional administrative burden on the Member States. In addressing Commissioner GENTILONI directly, he asked that all national recovery and resilience plans be adopted as a package to avoid the possibility that one Member State could get a head start. He also expressed his hope that the European Commission would serve as an advisory body to the Member States during the implementation process. Mr POGAČNIK pointed out that once the pandemic was over, Europe could face another crisis, namely an economic crisis like the one in 2008. Against this background, the RRF might not suffice and national governments were going to have to contribute as well in order to restore Europe's competitiveness. Digitalisation was going to be one key factor in obtaining this objective.

During the debate that followed, 30 speakers took the floor.

Mr Jean-François RAPIN, French *Sénat*, noted that his Chamber had not been consulted when the national recovery and resilience plan was drawn up, a point of critique raised by many parliamentarians including Mr António Lima COSTA, Portuguese *Assembleia da República*, Mr Angel TILVAR, Romanian *Senat*, Mr Domagoj HAJDUKOVIC, Croatian *Hrvatski sabor*, and Mr Rubén MORENO, Spanish *Cortes Generales*, who added that the spending of the funds needed to be monitored by the national Parliaments.

Mr Dragoş PÎSLARU, European Parliament, stressed that the national recovery and resilience plans needed democratic accountability and that monitoring the implementation of the plans by the national Parliaments was going to be of the utmost importance, a view seconded by Mr Robert ZĪLE, European Parliament.

Mr Nik PREBIL, Slovenian *Državni zbor*, emphasized the need to include as many stakeholders as possible in the implementation of the national recovery and resilience plans and added that special attention was needed to safeguard against the possibility of corruption.

Mr Damian BOESELAGER, European Parliament, extended an invitation to all Member States to exchange first-hand observations and cooperate closely during the implementation phase of the RRF.

Ms Sabine THILLAYE, French *Assemblée Nationale*, expressed great interest in how other national Parliaments were going to organise the monitoring of the implementation of their national plans and suggested that the Portuguese and Slovenian Presidencies draw up a corresponding table to be managed throughout the implementation phase.

Mr Zoltán BALCZÓ, Hungarian *Országgyűlés*, explained that the Hungarian government had decided to use only the grant as it did not wish to increase public debt.

Mr Igor PIMENOV, Latvian *Saeima*, raised the issue of generating mechanisms of fund-raising that enabled Member States to pursue independent active fiscal policy rather than to consume funds out of the EU facilities. He added that the activation of the general escape clause within the Stability and Growth Pact needed to be upheld once the pandemic was over in order not to retreat to austerity.

Mr Dimitris KAIRIDIS, Greek *Vouli ton Ellinon*, noted that the United States' fiscal stimulus exceeded the funds provided by the Recovery Facility and asked whether the amount was going to be raised and if its disbursement could be expected to be perpetuated.

Mr Reinhold LOPATKA, Austrian *Nationalrat*, said the Recovery Facility was to be understood as a continuation of the EU's cohesion policy in that it aimed at reducing economic differences among Member States. Accordingly, its success had to be compared to the results of previous cohesion funds.

In his reply, Commissioner GENTILONI emphasised that the European Union Recovery Plan was designed to lend added value to the measures which national governments had already put in place to tackle the crisis, and that it aimed to reduce the risk of fragmentation among Member States. In this regard, it was crucial for national recovery and resilience plans to be future-oriented, concentrated investments in the EU's twin transitions and addressed the necessary reforms that the European Commission laid out in its country-specific recommendations. The objective was not a rebound to the European growth-rate of 2019 but rather a transition towards the future. In view of the urgent need for public investments and the high level of public debt in some Member States, the European Commission intended to open discussions on several issues, among them a review of the EU's fiscal rules, scheduled for the second half of 2021. Mr GENTILONI stated that the European Commission welcomed the fiscal stimulus packages introduced by the US government, yet cautioned that the different structures and mechanisms in the USA and Europe called for different measures. He stated that while the RRF was designed as a one-off operation, it could prove to be apt for tackling other crises in the future. Mr GENTILONI concluded by stressing that the European Commission took good note of the involvement of national Parliaments by their respective governments. The role of national Parliaments had been differentiated during the period of designing the national recovery and resilience plans but was going to be crucial during the implementation phase.

Mr José Maria SÁNCHEZ, Spanish *Cortes Generales*, predicted that the consequences of the RRF were going to have long-term effects reaching beyond the next generation, noting that more than 80 percent of the Own Resources came from Member States. As a result, the indebtedness in the EU to be covered via

loans and transfers was to be shared directly or indirectly by all Member States, and therefore it would have an impact on the deficit rules.

Ms Marina BERLINGHIERI, Italian *Camera dei Deputati*, Mr Marko PAVIC, Croatian *Hrvatski sabor*, and Ms Sabrina RICCIARDI, Italian *Senato della Repubblica*, noted that their respective Parliament/Chamber had been involved in the drawing up of the national recovery and resilience plan. Ms RICCIARDI added that the Senate had listened to 300 stakeholders during the process and was now waiting for the approval of the plan by the European Commission and the European Council.

Ms Satu HASSI, Finnish *Eduskunta*, highlighted the global leadership role the EU enjoyed with regard to the creation of climate-friendly circular economies and stressed that investments had to be targeted accordingly.

Ms Lucia PUTTRICH, German *Bundesrat*, emphasised that regional interests had to be included in the process of the implementation of the national recovery and resilience plans, even though this was not legally required. This view was shared by Mr Bojan KEKEC, Slovenian *Državni svet*, and Ms Mariona ILLAMOLA, Spanish *Cortes Generales*. Mr Ruairí Ó MURCHÚ, Irish *House of the Oireachtas* raised the issue of social inequality which needed to be addressed in the course of the implementation.

In his reply, Mr Marko POGAČNIK, Chair of the European Affairs Committee, Slovenian *Državni zbor*, stated that when it came to the implementation of the national recovery and resilience plans, time was of the essence. Parliamentary scrutiny was necessary but could not go at the expense of the competitiveness of the European economy which needed to be restored. He welcomed the European Parliament's proposal to exchange experiences and good practices during the implementation process and supported the view that COSAC could act as a platform in this regard. The Slovenian Presidency would be hosting COSAC meetings in July and November 2021, in the context of which such an exchange could take place.

European Parliament First Vice-President METSOLA concluded the session by stating that there could not be a one-size-fits-all approach in the disbursement of funds as they had to meet the respective national, geographic and economic specificities of the individual Member States. She emphasised the responsibility that all political representatives involved had in ensuring full transparency throughout the process in order to keep the European citizens on board and deliver on the priorities of a green and digital transition which also tackled issues like youth unemployment and prepared the European Union for other challenges, among them the possibility of another pandemic.

6. Session IV: Conference on the Future of Europe: state of play

Keynote Speakers: Mr Guy VERHOFSTADT, Member of the European Parliament; Ms Ana Paula ZACARIAS, Secretary of State for European Affairs of Portugal; Ms Dubravka ŠUICA, Vice-President of the European Commission

Co-Chairs: Mr Luís CAPOULAS SANTOS, Chair of the European Affairs Committee of the Portuguese *Assembleia da República*; Mr Antonio TAJANI, Chair of the Committee on Constitutional Affairs of the European Parliament

Mr Luís CAPOULAS SANTOS, Chair of the European Affairs Committee of the Portuguese *Assembleia da República* opened his address by thanking all the Chairs of the Committees on Union Affairs for their cooperation in safeguarding the interests of national Parliaments in the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFE). While he expressed regret that not all ideas were included in the Rules of Procedure, he welcomed the fact that in the Conference Plenary national Parliaments would be represented by 108 members. He stressed this was achieved due to frequent and transparent exchanges of information and expressed the hope that such cooperation would continue in the future. He also thanked the Co-Chairs of the Executive Board Mr Guy VERHOFSTADT, Member of the European Parliament, for his initiatives and cooperation with

the members of the Presidential Troika of COSAC, and Ms Ana Paula ZACARIAS, Secretary of State for European Affairs of Portugal and Ms Dubravka ŠUIČA Vice-President of the European Commission, for their constructive work on the adoption of the final provisions of the CoFE.

Mr Antonio TAJANI, Chair of the Committee on Constitutional Affairs (AFCO) of the European Parliament started his introductory remarks by stressing that the European Parliament and the AFCO Committee had been fully committed to the launch of the CoFE in order to strengthen democracy in the EU. He emphasised that citizens needed to be put at the centre of the CoFE and said that AFCO had already presented working documents with proposals for citizen engagement. He underlined that the main conclusions of the CoFE would need to be reflected in proposals for policy and institutional changes.

Mr TAJANI commended the good cooperation among EU institutions, national Parliaments and other stakeholders to achieve the aims of CoFE. AFCO would continue contributing to this through concrete proposals on institutional reforms, the current COVID-19 and possible future crises and the improvement of principles of subsidiarity and proportionality. In conclusion, he stressed the need for a strengthened European democracy and advocated for a reform that would enable the European Parliament to propose legislation.

In his keynote speech, Mr Guy VERHOFSTADT, Member of the European Parliament gave an overview of the development and structure of the CoFE. He stated that the organisation of CoFE was crucial for the EU to reimagine its role in the future post-pandemic world, while safeguarding the interests of its citizens, adding that this was the first time all three European institutions had come together to organise such a project and underscored its potential for success, as all three institutions would be bound by its conclusions.

Mr VERHOFSTADT further stressed that the structure of the CoFE was based on a bottom-up approach. Citizens would have the opportunity to actively participate through the Multilingual Digital Platform and the European Citizens' Panels. Regarding the latter, he explained that four such panels would be organised in the second half of 2021 and that each panel would comprise of 200 randomly selected citizens.

Concerning the Conference Plenary, Mr VERHOFSTADT emphasised its interactive nature, where representatives from the national Parliaments, the European Parliament, the European Commission and the Council would discuss and formulate concrete proposals based on the recommendations from the European Citizens' Panels. He said that the inaugural plenary meeting would take place on 19 June 2021 and that invitations to form delegations had already been sent. He also explained that nine working groups would be established during the first plenary and expressed his opinion that these would be the engine for creating concrete proposals. The composition and chairing of these working groups would be equally distributed among the four pillars.

In conclusion, Mr VERHOFSTADT emphasised the principle of equal footing in the Conference Plenary and said that the final proposals would only be put forward based on a consensus of all four pillars².

Ms Ana Paula ZACARIAS, Secretary of State for European Affairs of Portugal, addressed the plenary meeting through a pre-recorded video message. She began by saying that the Portuguese Presidency was actively engaged in the conclusion of the negotiations on the Joint Declaration of CoFE. She emphasised the importance of national Parliaments' involvement in key moments of the CoFE. Because of this, the Presidency had promoted the involvement of the Presidential Troika of COSAC in the Executive Board to the status of a "permanent observer", and welcomed the agreement on the participation of 108 member of national Parliaments at the Conference Plenary.

Ms ZACARIAS stressed that the CoFE was primarily about citizens and their ideas about the future of Europe. She expressed her belief that the Executive Board had managed to address this by agreeing on a

² The European Parliament, national Parliaments, the Council and the European Commission.

transparent and forward-looking conference model that would use the full potential of digital technologies. In this context, she expressed hope for other stakeholders, especially national Parliaments to organise comprehensive events, in order to increase the citizens outreach.

She further explained the possibilities for active participation of citizens in the CoFE. They could participate through the Multilingual Digital Platform, which served as the central repository of the CoFE. In addition, four European Citizens' Panels were planned for debates on the nine topics³ of the CoFE and selected citizens would also participate as spokespeople at the Conference Plenary.

Ms ZACARIAS also noted that the Executive Board had approved the calendar of the CoFE, with the inaugural citizens' event to take place in Lisbon on 17 June 2021 and the first Conference Plenary to take place in Strasbourg on 19 June 2021. She underlined that the latter would play an important role in shaping the objectives and expectations of the whole CoFE.

She reassured participants that the Council of the EU was ready to receive citizens' ideas on the future of Europe. In this regard, she stressed the Portuguese Presidency's own contribution with the organisation of the Porto Summit on preserving and strengthening the European social model and implementing the European Pillar on Social Rights. She emphasised that the social dimension would be a central element in addressing the climate and digital transition and economic recovery.

In conclusion, Ms ZACARIAS stated that the European project had endless potential for growth and learning. She once again expressed hope that national Parliaments would capitalise on their close relationship with citizens, in order to translate their ideas into concrete actions.

In her keynote speech, Ms Dubravka ŠUICA, Vice-President of the European Commission, began by stating that an ever-closer Union was one that reflected the hopes and dreams of its citizens. For this to happen, representative democracies needed to be strengthened and the European Commission was taking various actions to support Member States in this regard, with the CoFE being the most notable one. The latter was designed with the view to enable direct citizen participation on equal footing and ensure a follow-up on their proposals. She noted that this was also a clear demand expressed by several national Parliaments in the 35th Bi-annual COSAC report. Ms ŠUICA further explained that a robust feedback mechanism would ensure that citizens' input would result in concrete policy recommendations and reiterated Commission President Ursula von der LEYEN's commitment to this end.

Concerning the Multilingual Digital Platform, Ms ŠUICA stated that since its launch there had been more than 560.000 visits. She emphasised its role for citizens' engagement during the pandemic but also expressed hope that in-person events would start soon. In this regard, she highlighted the importance of effective communication from all stakeholders to raise awareness and ensure maximal participation. She also called upon national Parliaments to organize citizens' panels on the national, regional and local level, and offered guidance from the European Commission.

Regarding the structure of the European Citizens' Panels and the Conference Plenary, she explained that the former would be comprised of 800 randomly selected citizens representing the EU's diversity and the latter would have 433⁴ participants including eighty representatives from European Citizens' Panels, among

³ Climate change and the environment; Health; A stronger economy, social justice and jobs; EU in the world; Values and rights; rule of law; security; Digital transformation; European democracy; Migration, Education, culture, youth and sport.

⁴ 108 representatives from the European Parliament, 108 representatives from national Parliaments, 54 from the Council and three from the European Commission, 80 representatives from European Citizens' Panels, the President of the European Youth Forum, 27 representatives from national Citizens' Panels, 18 representatives from the Committee of the Regions, 18 representatives from the Economic and Social Committee, 8 representatives from social partners and 8 representatives from the civil society..

them one third younger than 25 years. In this context she also emphasised the importance of gender balance in the Conference Plenary delegations.

In conclusion, Ms ŠUICA, reiterated that in the CoFE, national Parliaments would be on equal footing with the EU institutions. She also reassured colleagues of her further efforts to ensure citizens would see the impact of their deliberations.

During the debate that followed, 30 speakers took the floor. In their interventions, parliamentarians welcomed the launch of the CoFE. Ms Marina BERLINGHIERI, Italian *Camera dei Deputati* underlined the role of CoFE in successfully confronting new global challenges, with Mr Carlos BRÁS, Portuguese *Assembleia da República* adding that the Conference should take stock of the common solutions against the COVID-19 crisis for its future. Mr Jean-François RAPIN, French *Sénat* stressed the objectives of the CoFE were very ambitious and that respecting the April 2022 deadline would be a challenge.

A number of speakers welcomed the citizens-led approach of the CoFE (Mr Jean-François RAPIN, French *Sénat*, Mr Axel SCHAEFFER, German *Bundestag*, Mr Ruairí Ó MURCHÚ, Irish *Houses of the Oireachtas*, Ms Vita TERAUDA, Latvian *Saeima*, Mr Andrej ČERNIGOJ, Slovenian *Državni zbor*, Mr Pere Joan PONS, Spanish *Cortes Generales*). According to Ms Roberta METSOLA, European Parliament, this approach would enrich representative democracy by bringing representatives closer to their constituents. Several representatives also stressed the importance of ensuring sufficient outreach and feedback for citizens (Ms Lucia PUTTRICH, German *Bundestag*, Ms Marietta GIANNAKOU, Greek *Vouli ton Ellinon*, Ms Mariona ILLAMOLA, Spanish *Cortes Generales*, Mr Damian BOESELAGER, European Parliament). Concerning the latter, Ms Vita TERAUDA emphasised the need for traceability of citizens' contributions so they would be able to see their impact on concrete policy measures. Mr Bastiaan VAN APPELDORN, Dutch *Eerste Kamer* highlighted the need for involvement of all citizens, including the most sceptical ones and on a similar note Mr Kacper PLAZYNSKI, Polish *Sejm*, underlined the need for ensuring freedom of speech and pluralism during the CoFE. Several representatives also advocated for the inclusion of young people (Mr Domagoj HAJDUKOVIĆ, Croatian *Hrvatski Sabor*, Mr BRÁS, Mr Nik PREBIL, Slovenian *Državni zbor*, Mr PONS). Mr Joe MCHUGH, Irish *Houses of the Oireachtas*, added that Ireland had already had several positive experiences in organising national citizens' assemblies.

Mr HAJDUKOVIĆ said that the Croatian *Hrvatski Sabor* had already successfully organised a national launch of the CoFE to raise awareness about the possibilities of citizens' participation. In a similar vein Ms Roelien KAMMINGA, Dutch *Tweede Kamer*, said the Dutch national Parliament planned to organise events that answered to the needs of their border regions.

Mr Richárd HÖRCSIK, Hungarian *Országgyűlés*, pointed out that the invitations for the CoFE inaugural event were sent only two days in advance and expressed his hope that future cooperation would be based on equal footing. He also advocated for the participation of Western Balkan countries.

A number of speakers also welcomed the strong parliamentary dimension (Mr HAJDUKOVIĆ, Ms METSOLA, Ms Sabine THILLAYE, French *Assemblée Nationale*, Mr SCHAEFFER, Ms Marietta GIANNAKOU, Greek *Vouli ton Ellinon*, Mr Dario STEFANO, Italian *Senato della Repubblica*, Ms Jessika ROSWALL, Swedish *Riksdag*). Ms ROSWALL underlined that the CoFE was complementary to representative democracy, with both Ms ROSWALL and Mr STEFANO emphasising the need for national Parliaments to have a significant impact on the work of the CoFE. Ms GIANNAKOU agreed with this, especially if any potential Treaty changes were envisaged. Ms THILLAYE proposed that the COSAC Troika send a short questionnaire to national Parliaments about their planned initiatives during the CoFE.

Some representative also addressed the need for CoFE to bring changes to the Treaties (Mr VAN APPELDORN, Mr José Maria SÁNCHEZ, Spanish *Cortes Generales*, Ms ILLAMOLA). In this context,

Ms ILLAMOLA posed the question of whether Member States were prepared to act if citizens demanded changes in the Treaties.

Several representatives stressed that the focus of CoFE should be only on policy and not Treaty changes (Mr Jouni OVASKA, Finnish *Eduskunta*, Ms Laima Liucija ANDRIKIENĖ, Lithuanian *Seimas*, Ms ROSWALL). For Mr OVASKA and Ms ROSWALL, the focus should be on current concrete challenges, with Ms ROSWALL adding such an approach could tackle the rising Euroscepticism among EU citizens.

Representatives also mentioned several specific areas that should be strengthened through the CoFE, such as the Common Foreign and Security Policy (Mr STEFANO, Ms GIANNAKOU), taxation (Mr STEFANO), security (Mr OVASKA, Mr Marko POGAČNIK, Slovenian *Državni zbor*), strategic autonomy (Mr PONS), green and digital transition (Ms Laima Liucija ANDRIKIENĖ, Lithuanian *Seimas*), resilience (Ms ANDRIKIENĖ), migration policy (Mr SÁNCHEZ) and rule of law (Mr Ó MURCHÚ). In this context, Ms ANDRIKIENĖ also advocated that the CoFE should deliver on the New Strategic Agenda 2019-2024.

Mr POGAČNIK, expressed concern that the EU was falling behind the United States and the People's Republic of China in terms of competitiveness, proposing that the focus should therefore be on increasing EU's competitiveness, while also ensuring security.

Mr Muamer BAČEVAC, Serbian *Narodna skupština*, stated that Serbia was working diligently to implement reforms in order to ensure its full membership in the EU, adding that 18 negotiating chapters had been opened, with two more expected to be opened by end of June 2021. He reiterated that Serbia would remain a credible partner to the EU.

Ms Simonida KORDIC, Montenegrin *Skupština*, underlined that the future of Europe and the Western Balkans was interconnected and that therefore policy coordination with candidate countries was crucial to achieve advantageous economic development and stability in demographic movements.

Ms Maka BOTCHORISHVILI, Parliament of Georgia, stressed that the future of the EU was also the future of the Republic of Georgia and expressed hope that there would be a way for the latter to participate in the CoFE.

In her response, Ms ŠUICA welcomed the fact that national Parliaments saw citizens, especially young people, at the core of the CoFE. She underlined the importance of communication and said that the European institutions' services were working towards developing communications assets, which would be shared with Member States to increase the outreach to citizens. She emphasised the role of the feedback mechanism and said that if contributions from citizens included Treaty changes, the European institutions would need to follow up on that.

In his conclusion, Mr VERHOFSTADT noted that there was unanimity regarding the need for the CoFE. He reiterated that national Parliaments were on an equal footing with the three European institutions. Reforms were not possible without the support from the national Parliaments. He also underlined that there was no competition between representative and direct democracy in the CoFE. The involvement and contributions of the citizens would be the basis for the proposed reforms. Regarding the topics, he stressed that there were no priorities and that the Joint declaration neither prevented nor foresaw a debate on Treaty changes. Concerning practical questions, he said the agenda for the first Conference Plenary would be available soon. During the first plenary there would also be a general discussion on the expectations of stakeholders. On the matter of working groups, he stated that they would correspond to the nine topics available on the Multilingual Digital Platform and that representatives could choose their groups. Concluding, Mr VERHOSTADT confirmed that the representatives from the Western Balkan countries would be invited to certain plenaries.

The Chairman thanked all the participants for their contributions, both during this session and throughout the meeting, and, before concluding, played a short video message by the President of the Portuguese Republic, Mr Marcelo REBELO de SOUSA.

During his message, Mr REBELO de SOUSA, referred to the economic crisis, and the impact of the pandemic, which raised the need to think about the future, in a creative, innovative and bold manner.

He acknowledged the reality of coming out of the pandemic and noted the importance of learning from the concrete problems experienced by people in terms of health but also financial difficulties and the need for solidarity. The pandemic had brought about a change in many fields and in society in general.

With regard to the future of Europe, he stressed that it was imperative to prevent citizens from not feeling represented by the institutions.

Turning his attention to the global stage, he referred to the social, economic and political challenges involving cooperation with the rest of the world, including Africa and Asia, including countries like India and other important global players.

The President noted that Parliaments were close to the citizens in a way governments weren't. Hence, the greater responsibility, as they held political responsibility in Europe, and were obliged to respond to the concerns and fears of the European citizens, through various means, including the social Europe and the strengthening of democratic principles.

He thanked colleagues for all their work and encouraged them to play an even greater role in the future, as both Europe and the European citizens deserved as much in the effort to build an even greater Europe.

The Chair then gave the floor to Mr POGAČNIK and Mr KEKEC, thanking them for their cooperation and promising to return this during the Slovenian Presidency.

Mr POGAČNIK invited colleagues to the virtual meeting on 19 July for the Chairpersons, hoping that the plenary would be held in Ljubljana.

Mr KEKEC reiterated the invitation, adding that the meeting would be dedicated to the security dimension of digitalisation and would introduce the priorities to be later discussed in November, which included youth and the Western Balkans but also the Conference on the Future of Europe.

The Chair welcomed the opportunity to work so close with other politicians, and thanked colleagues for the solidarity, in particular those cooperating within the structure of the Presidential Troika. He welcomed the French colleagues to the Troika and wished Slovenia every success for its Presidency. He ended by thanking all the staff involved in making the COSAC meeting a success, from the interpreters to the COSAC Secretariat and the staff of the Portuguese *Assembleia da República*.